

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL  
CENTER FOR ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**INFORMANT: CAROL KEIRSTEAD**

**INTERVIEWER: MEHMED ALI  
KALE CONNERTY**

**DATE: MARCH 5, 2016**

**C=CAROL**

**A=ALI**

**K=KALE**

A: So this is interview with Carol Keirstead. Is that how you say it, Keirstead?

C: Keirstead, yup.

A: Keirstead, on March 5, 2016. And Carol thanks very much for willing to share some time for us.

C: Excited to do it.

A: Good, great.

K: All right. Well I'll just ask the first question. What do you know about the circumstances under which the IRF [Indochinese Refugee Foundation] was founded?

C: Um, what I know about its founding was Hai Ba Pho and his wife Lan Pho were Vietnamese refugees who settled in the country, and they wanted to establish an organization that was really, ultimately they wanted it sort of for and by the refugee community. So it was formed at a Mutual Assistance Association, which if memory serves me correctly was really to be governed by members of the refugee community. So, and his, his dream which actually came to fruition was to have the refugee community actually you know, set up their own service organizations. So that's what I recall about that a few years ago. [All laugh]

K: When did you start working for the IRF [Indochinese Refugee Foundation]?

C: In 1982.

K: Okay. And how long were you working there?

C: Two years.

K: Okay. Where had you previously been working?

C: The year before that I was with the university. I managed a Masters ESL Program for teachers in Lowell Public Schools. It was a federally funded project. So we trained “mainstream” classroom teachers to be able to effectively instruct English language learners. So I did that for a year.

K: While you (--)

A: I’m sorry. And Carol how did you get, get into this field overall?

C: So way back when Ed Moloney and I worked together for CETA, which was the, you know, federally funded sort of Skills in Employment Service Agency. And for whatever reason you know at the time when refugees were coming into the city I just sort of took it upon myself to reach out and do as best I could to serve that community through that program. And so at one point he said to me, “Carol, you know, Jackie is going to be leaving her position and I think you’d be great for it.” And I said, “Well I, you know, I’m not so sure about that,” you know, but anyway. So he encouraged me to apply and I did and got the job. So.

A: And where were you working for CETA previously like geographically?

C: In Lowell.

A: In Lowell, and where in Lowell?

C: Yup, it was up on Appleton Street. You know where the court is now?

A: Oh 89 Appleton, (C: You got it) The old Post Office?

C: Yup.

A: Okay. All right, that makes sense. And go ahead Kale.

K: How did you see the services offered by the IRF [Indochinese Refugee Foundation] change while you were there? Did you see any change? You were only there for two years, but.

C: Right. So in terms of change the actual services didn’t change much that I recall. Again that was a long time ago. You know what changed over time was either one, the

nature of the population, or the size of the population that we were serving. I mean when we first started refugees were being resettled at a pretty rapid rate in this city. So we were pretty, it was a pretty busy place. Yah, so over time I think it was the nature of the population that we were serving, not so much the services.

A: And tell us about those changes and the different people coming and going.

C: Yah, so you know it would vary. It was Vietnamese, Cambodian and Lao that we served and it just changed over time. The Vietnamese community was much smaller that we served ultimately just by sheer numbers, and the Cambodian community kind of started to excel. And there were a fair number of Lao families that we served as well. And that over time, probably even after I left, just kind of flattened and the Khmer population just kept, you know, people just kept relocating.

A: And why do you think the Cambodian population kind of grew where the other ones stayed maybe smaller?

C: You know I think it was just a phenomenon of having a solid sort of community who then would reach out to family, because Lowell at the time had very good employment situation. So we could get people jobs pretty easily.

A: Um.

C: So the word would get out and family would come and resettle. You know at the time there were pockets all across the country for different communities. Like the Hmong were in Minnesota. So for whatever reason communities just began to sort of invite and encourage people to come and resettle.

A: Where were you running the IRF [Indochinese Refugee Foundation] out of when you took over?

C: 79 High Street.

A: And tell us about that building, what was going on there.

C: Yah, so the first floor was the International Institute, and then the second floor was us, very small office space. And then we had, there was like an annex, which was a very large room where we could hold functions and hold classes, and stuff like that. So it was great because the International Institute was right below us. So we could collaborate a lot on serving people.

K: What do you think were the most essential services you offered? What was the most important?

C: Hm. Well the obvious ones right would be employment services and language services. We had ESL Employment and Cultural Orientation Services. So those were

critical. People needed jobs, but I think overall it was the welcoming, culturally sensitive, supportive, proactive sort of approach that we took to just you know, helping people to resettle in a new community.

So we'd do things like you know, have big household drives to have people donate all kinds of things, because the refugee community they just needed so much. They were in pretty substandard housing by in large. I mean I recall at the time there were a couple of prominent landlords and the housing was pretty substandard. So you know, that was (--) So we did what we did and more.

A: Yah. Who were some of the landlords around town that were notable?

C: It was George [Chambros], [Chambers], [Chamberos]?

A: Chamberas?

C: Yah, was the biggie.

A: Okay. How about Mr. Saab?

C: No, he wasn't, that I knew of he wasn't somebody that we encountered.

A: He might have gravitated over to the commercial stuff by that point.

C: Yah probably.

A: Because I know he had a lot in the, maybe in the 60s and 70s. I wasn't sure.

C: And I sponsored a family while I was in my role.

A: Yah?

C: And the family I sponsored was a very, a family you know, non-literate and you know from the Province. And so I had to work over a year's time with them to help them get housing and get settled and all that stuff. I'll never forget the first time we found an apartment for them. It was a decent apartment over in Centralville. And I was helping them unpack, and you know getting everything settled. And we had all kinds of things donated for them. And you know it was just so remarkable to step back and understand what the experience was like for them, right. So a hairdryer, like they were just so fascinated with a hairdryer. They thought it was to cook meat right.

A: Oh, to cook meat?

C: Right, and then you know, we were helping them put stuff away and they were putting all the meat in the drawers and all of the appliances in the refrigerator. I mean just you know, they had no idea.

K: Yah.

C: So it was quite the learning experience. And a lot of the work that I did was advocacy work, particularly with the school department, because at the time they were enrolling I think it was like fifty students a week at one point.

A: Wow.

K: Wow.

C: And you know, we were hearing, you know there was one case I'll never forget. There was a girl who probably had PTSD. No, I know she had PTSD, and they didn't know what to do with her. So they kept her home. They didn't serve her. So a lot of the work we did had to be sort of advocacy oriented in working with other organizations to help them understand the population and help them do right by them.

A: Yah. What made you decide that you wanted to sponsor that one family?

C: Well my thing was to sort of walk the talk in what I do. So I just wanted to do that as part of you know, not just get paid for the work but the refugee community would actually step up and help out.

K: Okay. So what were all of your duties and stuff? You already talked about advocacy work, but what else were [unclear]?

C: So I supervised the staff that we had. We had bilingual bicultural staff. I oversaw all of the programming. Oversaw all of the paperwork with Office of Refugee Resettlement, you know, had to oversee all of the records and stuff like that.

A: And that was a federal agency?

C: Yes. And so you know, all of the administrative things that go along with an administrative job, which I didn't have a clue how to do until I got this job. So it was really learning on the job, but it was great. And I'd say, you know, a fair amount of it was really outreach to the community and helping you know, doing cultural orientations out in the community. Really just helping develop understanding as much as I could about, you know, the communities that were coming into Lowell.

K: Was there anything while you were on your job that you found unexpected, like any tasks that you had to do that you weren't prepared for, well not prepared for but just weren't expecting?

C: Yah, firing staff was hard. [Laughs]

A: Yah, and without going into the specific persons what was the kind of nature of the work that made it difficult?

C: It was a staff person that was, you know, I adored him and he was well respected in the community, but just didn't do his job. So you know, at some point you have to address things like that and it's hard, particularly when you're a white female and the person is a member of the community. It's very difficult. So that was my probably biggest challenge.

A: Was there any kind of fallout with the community from that?

C: Yes, this individual actually, yes there was.

A: Okay.

K: How many people do you think you helped over there, how many families?

C: Oh Lord. You know I'm sorry. I wouldn't even know how to, I wouldn't know how to do that. You probably have the record. I just don't even (--) I know we had to report on it every month. We had to submit monthly reports.

A: Yah. No, that's fine.

K: We actually might have those in our archives, yah.

C: That would be interesting to see, yah.

A: Could you describe the community as they were coming into Lowell? And you talked about the, you know, kind of issues with understanding kind of technology and things like that, which they had never seen before.

C: Right, right. So I guess it was really recognizing that what they had to become accustomed to and what they had to learn was going to take time. And that they just needed a lot of support to acculturating and learning what they needed to learn, and in the employment setting. So that was a whole other thing. So my job as director that was my (--) We had ESL teachers, and we had cultural specialists, but my job was to find jobs for people. That was part of my role. So you know, I had to make sure that the work place could accommodate people who were, you know, had various levels of education and, you know, could handle expectations in the work place and stuff like that. So that was, that was a challenge.

A: So tell us what companies were out kind of that you connected with?

C: I remember a big one was BASF. (A: Umhm) So there were a lot of electronic firms at that time and medical supply firms where all folks would have to do is piecework, put stuff together. And it was a pretty good job in the tech industry. So Wang, some people

could get in. Not a lot, but some people could get into Wang. But there were a couple. BASF I remember and it will come to me after you leave. [Laughs]

A: That's fine.

C: There are a few sort of you know, our go-tos.

A: Where was BASF? Was that in Nashua?

C: Bedford.

A: Oh Bedford, okay. Good. And do you remember any kind of stories connected with people getting jobs and you know, perceptions on that and feelings from the community response?

C: Can you say more about that? What are you, what are you thinking?

A: Yes. Just I mean did, um, you know, do you remember any particular stories where you know, you got somebody a job and it really kind of changed their outlook, or their family's outlook?

C: I'm sure. I just can't at the top of my head recall. You know I'm sure there were many, but yah.

A: Yah. What was the, what's your perception on the city's reception of these immigrants?

C: I would say one of the reasons we ended up with such a large community is because by in large the city stepped up. They didn't always do the right thing, but by in large the city really stepped up I think. You know, a lot of the churches were heavily involved. Eliot Church, Saint Patrick's was a huge supporter. Yah, so churches played a big role in really helping refugee communities. So I would say yah, Lowell was pretty, Lowell did a pretty good job.

A: Is there any way to find like what that could be attributed to?

C: So who would have been there at the time? Gee, I can't even tell you. George Tsapatsaris was the Superintendent of Schools.

A: Okay. Did you guys have a relationship with the school department?

C: I did, you know, it was sometimes heated because I did go to bat for people.

A: Okay.

C: So sometimes I'd be told you know, tell that Keirstead to cease and desist. [Laughs]

A: Why? Over what issues?

C: You know, I (--) This is who I am. I don't like injustice. Where there's injustice I do whatever I can do. So when I saw cases where kids weren't being served well, like a classroom was set up in a bathroom for a group of Laotian kids. I said, "Uh huh, not okay." Um, that student I remember going to bat for because she had some you know, she was dealing with some emotional trauma and they kept her home. They wouldn't serve her. So it was things like that. I just (--)

A: And I'm sorry, when you said they wouldn't serve, I originally thought you meant the family, but you were talking about the school department?

C: School department.

A: Okay, and was that Cambodian?

C: She was Lao I believe this particular girl.

A: Okay.

C: You know how certain people stand out in your mind? Yah, but you know so at the same time George respected me and I respected him, but I had to just, you know, do that and he had to push back. So you know.

A: Where was the, which school were the kids in the bathroom originally?

C: The Daley.

A: The Daley? Okay. [Chuckles] All right, and I imagine there was some, I mean, growing pains from the school department's perspective right?

C: Oh everybody was out of space and it was, I mean really they were registering like fifty kids a week. And after I left the Indochinese Refugee Foundation I went to work. They recruited me for the public school system. So I ran the Southeast Asian Curriculum Program. And so you know, I then saw it on that end. Yah, I mean. And then I worked at the, did you hear about the Moore Street School?

A: They Morey?

C: Moore Street?

A: Moore Street School up in the Grove.

C: Yah, so it was really the only segregated publically supported school that had existed in a very long time. It was all Cambodian kids.



A: Now how did that school become only Cambodians? Had it been closed previously?

C: It was a private catholic that was closed by the Diocese.

A: Okay.

C: So Lowell rented it I guess (A: Okay) and set it up to serve this huge population of kids they didn't have a place to put. So that was in existence. I worked there for like a year with Bob Keegan. He was the principle. He's since passed away, but um, yah. So that was an interesting experiment.

A: What was that school like? How would you describe it?

C: So I thought it was wonderful. I mean I get segregation, I get it, but it was a protected, all about these kids, giving them what they needed in environment. They didn't have to deal with being treated whatever. So it was a protected environment and we could design the program just for them.

A: Um.

C: In fact, have you seen the Southeast Asian book? Probably right?

A: The Jim Higgins photo book?

C: The cover, that's the Moore Street School.

A: Yah, I, well I just was looking at that book recently and I said, "Where the heck was this school?" I didn't know anything about it. (C: Yah) So when you said it I was, yah.

C: Yah, funny.

A: What else can you talk about with that school? What were the programs that you were running that wouldn't be found anywhere else?

C: Well it was you know, before it was a bilingual program. So back then we believed in bilingual education in this state. We don't anymore by the way. So it was a bilingual program where kids had native language instruction and ESL. So we could design the program so that they got their content, you know, in the native language and then had sort of sheltered English class instruction too. So it was great.

A: What was the building like physically? Was it in a decent shape?

C: It was decent.

A: Okay.

C: Yah, yah, it was okay.

A: No leaky roofs or anything?

C: No, no, it was okay.

A: Okay, good. Um, you talk about Lowell being basically an accommodating community. Any instances where you remember where it didn't shine in that area?

C: Housing I would say.

A: And what were the issues there?

C: Really substandard housing. I mean most of the families when I'd go visit, you know, they'd be roaches all over the walls. They'd be roach paper just like wallpaper, you know, so just really substandard housing.

A: And did the IRF [Indochinese Refugee Foundation] get involved in kind of helping to change that situation?

C: You know I'm sure we tried. You know we tried to get families into the best housing situations we could, but there was limited, limited stock so to speak. And you know, it was a big, it's a bigger issue than we could take on, because it's really, it's you know, it hasn't changed. [Laughs]

A: Yah, yah.

C: So.

A: I know there was a group around town I think primarily connected to churches, but the Ethnic Covenant?

C: Oh my God, yah! Jay. Jay. What was his name? Great group.

A: Okay. Tell us what you know about the group.

C: Oh, [unclear] the dust off the cobwebs. Jay was the gentleman who founded it I believe. And I remember they authored a paper called "Thirty Pieces of Silver" maybe? Right, is that is?

A: I think that's it, yah.

C: Um, so yah, they were a very advocacy oriented group who really I think sought to speak the truth on behalf of vulnerable populations. Yah, yah, God thank you for mentioning that.

A: Did the IRF [Indochinese Refugee Foundation] have any connection with them?

C: Yah, yah, we, I can't remember exactly what we did together, but we definitely collaborated and communicated a lot. Yah, yup.

A: Tell us about the everyday work week at the IRF [Indochinese Refugee Foundation].

C: It was, I mean the reason I stayed for two years is because I ate, breathed and slept right, because it was just nonstop, never ending. It didn't end at 5:00. So yah, I mean that was primarily why I had to sort of go to a "more normal job". It was you know, doing the administrative stuff and then dealing with things all day long that would come up; refugees coming in with whatever issues that they had and we would have to figure out how to help them. So it was doing your regular job and then attending to people's needs as they would come through the door, which you never knew what those were going to be.

A: Jackie told us a little bit about some of the issues that the refugees had with kind of accessing health services. Do you have any (--)

C: Yes, yah, yes. So I would say a big issue for refugees, and I don't know what Jackie's perspective was, they were very reluctant in a way to access American medical services. And we often would have to (--) Oh, I just thought about this other case. Oh my God.

A: Yah, tell us about that case.

C: I'm just getting emotional. Sorry.

A: That's okay. That's okay. Sorry.

C: Wow, I didn't expect that one. [Crying]

A: That's okay, take a few minutes.

C: So there was this day, and in walked a woman with her daughter in her arms and her daughter was almost lifeless. So Chulathy was her name. And so we arranged to have her taken by ambulance to the hospital and I ended up following her for quite some time and they could never figure out what was wrong with her. And you know part of me is feeling like I should have done more, but whatever. And she just like languished in the system and they couldn't figure out what was wrong with her. She was dying and I'll never (--) They let her go home at some point and somewhat later I heard that she just died in Lowell High School. She just died. So, I mean and I tried to work with the family and it was just you know, a lot of Southeast Asians believe in spiritual even sometimes sort of ghosts like things right. And so translating between that belief system and western medicine is nearly impossible. And then you got the language barrier in between. So I, you know, I worked with the family and I worked with you know, I'd go

to visit Chulathy and she just always, she was always doing this. It hurt, it hurt, it hurt, and they could never figure out what she had.

A: So she was always holding her fist to her chest?

C: Yup, like this and they never could figure out what she had. So, sorry.

A: Other issues on medical or health access?

C: There weren't the language and cultural resources that of course there are now. So it was really, really difficult. Yah, I didn't even think of that. It was really difficult to get adequate care for people because of the language barrier and the cultural barriers. Yah.

A: So talk about the language barriers in general?

C: Well I didn't speak any of the language [laughs]. So I always had to rely on you know, my folks to translate. And so when refugees would go do whatever they had to do they would always have to find somebody, oftentimes the younger kid in the family, and rely on that person as their translator which right, is not ideal. So yah, it was, it was really tough. And that was a lot of the work that our staff had to do, which they weren't paid to do really. I mean their jobs were not to be translators, but there you go right.

K: Umhm.

A: Yah, yah. Any funny stories about IRF [Indochinese Refugee Foundation] workplace?

C: Yah, so this may not want to be (--) [Laughs] You don't have to stop it but there were a lot of funny things, but I'll never forget this one time. Alise Martin, do you know Alise Martin?

A: Yah.

C: She was the ESL teacher.

A: Oh she worked at the IRF [Indochinese Refugee Foundation]?

C: Yah.

A: Okay. That's another interview.

K: We have her [unclear].

C: And I think she was the teacher at this time. We had a couple while I was there, but I went down to the classroom just to check on things. And we often had people donate goods. So we'd have plastic bags all along the side of the classroom. So I went down

and looked in the classroom and there was a big ruckus going on. And I'm like everybody is laughing and you know, I'm like what's going on? So what happened was somebody had donated things and there was a box on tampons in there. And the Ref, whoever found them thought they were firecrackers. So they're all trying to light tampons. [All laugh] That was a fun one, yah.

A: Other kind of workplace issues at the IRF [Indochinese Refugee Foundation]?

C: You know we always could have used more. It was always a scramble to have enough resources to do what we needed to do. And I don't remember at the time. I remember getting some grants here and there, some small grants to do different things, but I can't recall what they were.

A: Yah. Now you worked with the federal government. Did you work with any state agencies?

C: We, I'm trying to think. Well there was the Office of Refugee Resettlement in Massachusetts. So every state has its own.

A: Okay.

C: Yah, yah.

A: Okay. So the office you primarily dealt with was kind of, they controlled the funds that the federal government (--)

C: Right.

A: Okay I see.

C: They were sort of a pass through.

A: Do you remember any individuals or issues with the state?

C: No. I mean like any, I've managed many of those things since then. Like there are always challenges with it, but you know.

A: Yah, regular bureaucracy stuff.

C: Yah, right, right, nothing that I can recall out of the ordinary.

A: Good.

K: Did you see funding change while you were there at all?

C: I don't remember. Really I don't remember.

K: Did working with the IRF [Indochinese Refugee Foundation] change your perspective on anything, like such as minority groups, non-profit work?

C: It was life changing for me.

K: Really.

C: Because when I left there I went to work for the school department and then I went to work overseas in a Refugee Program. So I never would have done that if I hadn't had this opportunity. And then I adopted somebody from Cambodia. So it really was life changing for me.

K: Now where did you work overseas?

C: In the Philippines, in the Philippine Refugee Camp.

K: And was that the camp where Cambodians and other folks from Southeast Asia were coming?

C: A lot. There were several camps in Thailand and then there was PRPC in the Philippines, and there were a couple of smaller ones in Indonesia.

A: Okay.

C: When I went the largest population were Amerasians.

A: From mainly from Vietnam?

C: Umhm.

A: Okay. Why don't you tell us a little bit about how you got involved in that project?

C: So when I was at the Refugee Foundation I was able to make contacts. I also worked at Middlesex Community College in between, that's right. So I worked at Lowell Public Schools. Then I went to Middlesex and help set up the new campus, because what they wanted to do in setting up the new campus with Molly Sheehy was my, person I worked with, was to set up what they called a Resource Center, because they wanted to provide outreach services to the Southeast Asians in setting up the new campus. So I did that for two years. So through my work at the Foundation and through Middlesex I made contacts with the U.S. State Department. And when I decided I wanted to try it I just called and said, "How do you do that?" And the women said, "Well here's what you do." And so I applied to this organization and they flew me down for an interview. And within a month I was gone. So yah, it was great.

A: Good. So tell us about the camps. There was one major camp for?

C: The one I worked in was one major camp, but there were many camps and operation at that time in Thailand. So a lot of Refugees from Lowell, some would have come through the camp I worked at, some would have come through Thailand.

A: From Khao-I-Dang

C: Yup, Phanat Nikhom, Khao-I-Dang, yup.

A: And what was the camp that you worked at in the Philippines?

C: It was called PRPC, Philippine Refugee Processing Center. Bad name! What are we, cows? Yah, anyway. So it was a really large camp. We serviced I think at any one time there were about 100,000 people there. It was nine kilometers long. It was along a ridge. It was beautiful, gorgeous, and there were several international organizations there, like World Relief. ICMC was the group I worked for. There were many, many, many. So my group ran the, what they called the Pass Program, which was for kids 11.5 - 16 who were coming to the states. So it was like a school to get them ready for school here. So I ran that program.

A: And would those kids be orphans primarily?

C: They were, they were not on paper orphans. So a lot of the, you probably know this, so a lot of the Amerasians kids that ended up coming came through very nefarious means. So they were orphans in their country, but because people knew they were gold tickets to get to the states. That's what they were called. They would sort of adopt them to get to the states.

A: Oh! So parents that had no blood, or people that had no blood connections to (--)

C: In some cases right. And in some, you know, that wasn't all of the cases, but it was prevalent. And in some cases you know, the families really did care about the kids. And then we had a Khmer population while I was there. And did we have Lao? If we had Lao it was like miniscule. So it was mostly Vietnamese and Khmer when I was there. And the Catholic Church was there, the Mormons were there. I mean it was like a whole community.

A: Yah. Any difficulties there between the different nationalities?

C: Sometimes, yah. Sometimes they'd be pretty nasty clashes.

A: Remember any stories or incidents?

C: Not particularly, but it wasn't, it wasn't often, but you know, once in a while, yup.

A: Now did you, did you work with Cambodian folks (C: Yup) there? And did some of those people end up in Lowell?

C: Yah. Like you know, if I'm talking to somebody whose, who I think could fit the age range, if I meet somebody, I'll ask them. "So what camp were you in?" And sometimes it will be that one. Yah, it's kind of cool.

A: How long did you end up staying there?

C: Two years. I do everything for two years I think. [Laughs] I like to start things up. I did. I've been in my job for twenty. So yah.

A: Maybe we should go back a little bit more and talk about your transition from IRF [Indochinese Refugee Foundation] to the School Department. How did that come about?

C: If memory serves me, which sometimes it doesn't, I believe Ann O'Donnell approached me.

A: Don Pearson?

C: Ann O'Donnell.

A: Oh I'm sorry, Ann O'Donnell.

C: She was the head of the bilingual program.

A: Okay.

C: For a very long time. And I believe she approached me and asked me if I'd be interested. They had this position. I think they got federal funds for it or something.

A: It was a new position?

C: Yup, to oversee development of a Southeast Asian curriculum. So yup.

A: Tell us all about that.

C: So in my role I oversaw, I had three curriculum developers, one Lao, one Khmer, and one Vietnamese. And so our job was to try to develop a, you know, native language curriculum that they could use in the schools, and that was a huge lift, because you know, we're talking K-12. I mean it was a huge lift. So we mostly focused on literacy, and then would you know as we could develop materials, you know, in other content areas. But we'd produce our own books and stuff like that, yup. And I believe, and you guys would know maybe the timeline. So there was a time when there was going to be a shift away from the Indochinese Foundation to splitting off the groups. When you talk to Hai he'll know.



A: Okay. So like when the CMAA [Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association] was formed?

C: Yah!

A: Yah, so the CMAA [Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association] was formed in 84.

C: Yup.

A: And I don't know. Was there a Lao and Vietnamese?

C: There, well there was an effort. (A: Okay) It didn't take hold, but there was an effort to do that, yah.

A: Okay. So the CMAA was really the only group that kind of had legs?

C: It ended up, yup, that I recall. Yup.

K: Do you keep in touch with anyone you worked with, or while working for, at the IRF?

C: Not really keep in touch. I, you know, I would see people out in the community and you know, a couple of families I keep in touch with that I served, but I don't keep in touch with staff as much. In fact it's funny one of the families that I for whatever reason just became really close with, a Lao family, their daughter now has children my middle son's age and they're best friends.

K: Oh.

C: So she, so you know when she came to the IRF [Indochinese Refugee Foundation] she was like yay big, and now she's mom to two kids and so it's yah, it's great.

K: What about the family you sponsored?

C: I have no idea. [Unclear], I have no idea. You know my life took a, you know, a left turn. You know, when you have kids everything, everything changes. So you know, I became much less involved in the community. I took this job up in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. So I became sort of much less connected here.

A: Yah. So you went from IRF [Indochinese Refugee Foundation] to the school department and then (--)

C: Then to Middlesex.

A: And then to Middlesex. And how did you get connected up with Middlesex if you recall?

C: Maybe Molly Sheehy?

A: Okay.

C: Yah, I think that's probably likely.

A: Okay. And what did you do at (--) You talked a little bit about it already, but.

C: So you know, in setting up the Lowell Campus they were mindful, right that they wanted to serve the Southeast Asian population. So we set up this um, and they had a Gateway City's Grant I believe to do that. So myself and a Hispanic community Leader, Peki Wilson, who was at the time really well regarded in the Latino community (--)

A: How do you spell the first name?

C: Peki, P E K I was her nickname. Griselda was her first name.

A: Raselda?

C: Griselda.

A: Griselda. Okay.

C: She was Cuban, but very well regarded in the Hispanic community. So she and I were sort of the two key staff at the Resource Center which operated out of Wannalancit at the time, because we started at Wannalancit right?

A: Yah.

C: And so our job really was to provide sort of counseling so to speak to you know, kids who were interested in maybe attending Middlesex, and while they were at the college providing a lot of bicultural support for them. You know, doing special events with them and just being there as a listening ear.

A: Were there a lot of students coming to Middlesex when, at the beginning essentially?

C: Well I think because of our outreach we started really to get kids you know aware of the college and starting to come into the college.

A: How did you do the outreach? Do you recall?

C: Well by that time I had, you know, because of my work at the Foundation I had a pretty good network. So that wasn't a huge lift. You know, without that I don't know what I would have done, but yah.

A: So who were some of the community leaders from the different refugee communities at that time?

C: So the Lao I would say Kumson Silavong. I think he's passed recently. Sommanee Bounphasaysone, she's actually a really good friend of mine. Who else in the Lao community? That's what I recall, and Sommanee worked for the DCF ultimately.

A: So many Lao folks or?

C: Sommanee is her name, sorry. [Laughs]

A: [Laughs] I'm going deaf anyways, so.

C: I know you and me both. So in the Cambodian community at the time it was Michael Ben Ho (A: Umhm), great man.

A: Yah, he just passed away as well.

C: I know. Narin Sao. (A: Umhm) You probably know them all. I'm trying to think who else. Those are the two that come to mind really.

A: Okay. Is Narin still around?

C: Yup.

A: Okay.

C: Yah, he lives in Chelmsford but he's around. He's a great guy, great guy.

A: Any politicians that stood out either kind of pro refugee, or not so pro?

C: Like if you tick check off names I could say "Oh yah, I know," but (--)

A: One of the guys over the years, a couple of the guys that could be perceived as not being super friendly would be Tarsy Poullos. [Both same name at same time].

C: Tarsy Poullos, right, it just all of a sudden came back to me! Yah, he was like the Donald Trump of Lowell. So I'd say yah.

A: Do you remember any interactions with any of your jobs with him?

C: No.

A: Okay. Anybody on the pro side?

C: I'm sure there were, because again we had, you know, we had a fair amount of (--) Oh God I'm just remember on the school board, Katherine Stoklosa. She blamed me for all of the refugees coming to the city.

A: How so?

C: At the school committee meeting.

A: Oh really?

C: Yah.

A: And so she didn't think it was a good idea?

C: Oh no! We should stop those people from coming, yup. I mean a lot of people were (--) It's you know, it's fear you know the unknown. Right, it's so common, we don't learn.

A: Good.

K: Do you see any similarities in your job today with working with the IRF [Indochinese Refugee Foundation]

C: No. I wish I did. [Laughs] No, I'm (--)

A: We won't leave that on the record.

C: Yah! I'm pretty far removed from feeling like I have an impact on people's lives, but that's okay.

K: He kind of skips this question, but what was the most interesting or enjoyable part of your job?

C: Oh the people. Oh God yah. Just really, just delightful people, and some of them could be like royal pains in the asses, but you know. Hai's father worked for me, and a wonderful, wonderful man. And he was very set in his ways. So supervising him was a challenge, but you know, wonderful, wonderful man. And so just really wonderful people and I learned a lot.

A: Any final thoughts about your time working for the IRF [Indochinese Refugee Foundation]?

C: No, just that you know, I want to thank Jackie's husband. [Laughs] Really it was a life changer for me, that opportunity, and Hai. It really was. I mean they took a risk with me, because I was (--) How old was I? I was young, really and you know, I guess the good thing for me was nobody had that experience because it was so new. So they took a chance with me and it was great.

A: Yah, you said Jackie's husband?

C: He's the one that recommended me for the job.

A: Jackie Moloney's husband?

C: Yup.

A: Oh, okay, and how did you know him?

C: I worked with him at CETA, the (--) Yup, Ed.

A: Yah, okay. What did he do at CETA?

C: He was one of the managers. So there was Ed and Henry Przydzial, and yah. But yah, he just pulled me aside and said, "Hey, Jackie's leaving this job. I think you should go for it." Now Jackie is brilliant. And going in trying to fill her shoes, I had to get over that one right away. Yup, she's brilliant.

A: How so?

C: I don't know she just is.

A: But I mean how did you feel that you (--) Was there a learning curve from what Jackie had done?

C: I mean I would have, if I tried to sort of emulate what she did, or be who she was I would have failed. So I had to just find my own way in the job and yah. And I was successful, but I'm just saying you know, yah.

A: Any final thoughts about your time working here in the city.

C: No, I mean I miss it. I loved doing that kind of work. My work is like I said, very removed. You know, I have a federally funded job where I lead a multi-million dollar grant, blah, blah, blah. So it's a great job and but I loved doing community work. Someday in my retirement.

A: Yah, why not?

C: Yah.

A: Great.

K: I think that's it, right?

C: Thank you so much.

K: Thank you.

A: Thank you.

K: Yah, this is great.

C: So are you a student at UMass?

K: Yah, I'm a student. I'm a sophomore.

C: What are you studying?

Interview ends  
jw